

Young Guns Aim for Democratic Leadership

June 16th, 2003

By Erin P. Billings

Roll Call

House Democratic leaders have barely settled into their new jobs, but that hasn't kept Members from eyeing the possibility that there will be openings at the top as soon as 2006.

No major changes are expected in the current election cycle as Democrats give their new leaders time to prove themselves and try to regain the House majority. But well-placed Democratic sources indicate that in the next four years, if progress isn't made, the Caucus will begin pushing for a shakeup.

"These [current leaders] get two Congresses if we make gains," said one top staffer to a veteran Democratic Member. "If we don't make gains, then things could change." The crop of Democrats expected to seek a shot at the top in the future ranges from senior lawmakers with long-held leadership goals to freshmen with lofty ambitions.

Among the names circulating are senior Reps. Martin Frost (Texas) and Rosa DeLauro (Conn.), both veterans of the leadership, and newer faces such as former White House adviser Rep. Rahm Emanuel (Ill.), freshman Rep. Kendrick Meek (Fla.), third-term Rep. Jan **Schakowsky** (Ill.), a confidante of Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (Calif.), and maverick Rep. Harold Ford Jr. (Tenn.).

Others who are viewed as potential players in future contests are moderate Blue Dog Rep. Jim Turner (Texas), Chief Deputy Minority Whip Joe Crowley (N.Y.), Pelosi ally and Hispanic Caucus member Rep. Hilda Solis (Calif.), freshmen Maryland Reps. Dutch Ruppersberger and Chris Van Hollen, newcomer Rep. Artur Davis (Ala.) and Congressional Black Caucus Chairman Rep. Elijah Cummings (Md.).

"It's fair to say that the next generation hasn't been fully identified yet," said one source close to

the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. "But there are plenty of ambitious Members in the Caucus."

Term limits assure that House Democrats will replace Rep. Bob Menendez (N.J.) as Caucus chairman and Rep. James Clyburn (S.C.) as vice chairman by the end of 2006. But scenarios are already being discussed in which other positions would open up as well, including the top two slots.

What's more, some existing leaders may have their eye on other jobs - including the Senate or state offices.

The Whip's position could come available if Rep. Steny Hoyer (D) is persuaded by Maryland Democrats to take a swipe at ousting the state's GOP governor, ex-Rep. Bob Ehrlich. Some even suggest that, should Pelosi fail to lead her party to gains in the House next fall, her situation could become more tenuous.

Pelosi, 63, has made plain she has no plans to pursue any other elected post in her political lifetime.

"It's very easy to see where Pelosi is going," said one senior Democratic aide. "She wants to be Speaker of the House."

A Democratic leadership aide said it could easily be eight to 10 years before Pelosi relinquishes her role as party leader.

Another senior aide agreed that it was unlikely Pelosi would ever be involuntarily taken down as leader, but said she would likely feel pressure to step down after two terms if the party was still in the minority.

Over time, Democrats are likely to be less forgiving of Pelosi than they were of Gephardt, who remained as Minority Leader for four terms, several senior Caucus sources said.

"If we pick up seats or take back the House she'll be OK," said one aide. "But if we lose seats it will be marked as a failure and she'll probably take the blame for it."

Another Democratic staffer to a well-placed Member said Hoyer would likely run for the top opening if Pelosi was to step down. But at 64, Hoyer may not want to wait indefinitely for her tenure to end, the aide said.

If Democrats were to succeed in taking the majority, Pelosi appears certain to claim the Speaker's gavel, while Hoyer would become Majority Leader, likely without significant opposition.

Such a best-case scenario for Democrats would open the Whip position and perhaps other posts down the line.

"There will be a lot of vying for open slots," said a Democratic aide whose boss has leadership ambitions. "I wouldn't count anyone out - both folks in the leadership now and Members who haven't run before."

While the Minority Whip has not signaled any interest in challenging Ehrlich, the newly elected Maryland governor will be a prime target for Democrats in 2006. And Hoyer - a Maryland political player for nearly 40 years - is expected to receive some pressure to run. Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley and Montgomery County Executive Doug Duncan are currently seen as the most likely Democratic contenders.

"For someone of Mr. Hoyer's stature, the governorship is always an option," said a high-placed Democratic aide. "He has the name recognition throughout the state, he's well-connected and he's well-liked among his peers."

But another aide said Hoyer is more inclined to stay around and hopes to move up in the House: "He's made a career here for 22 years."

While unlikely, one aide who works for a veteran Member suggested that Hoyer may consider taking on Pelosi if the House margins remain bleak. "We'd have to lose really, really bad for Hoyer to challenge Pelosi because I think he recognizes he doesn't have any more support than he did when he ran against her last time."

Further down the ladder, Menendez, No. 3 in the leadership line, is considered highly ambitious. The youngest of the top Members at 49, he's considered a likely Senate prospect and could seek New Jersey Sen. Frank Lautenberg's seat in 2008, if Lautenberg decides against a re-election bid.

"Menendez is still the unanswered question," said one of the senior aides. "He may be next in line to run for Whip if we take back the House, but it isn't a foregone conclusion. He still has to prove himself to the Caucus."

"The beauty for Menendez is he has another option. I think he would run for Senate regardless because I don't think Menendez or any of us is convinced we will win back the House until it happens."

With so many possible scenarios, top Democratic aides anticipate it won't be long before positioning for future runs bursts into the open.

Neither DeLauro nor Frost is expected to idle in the rank-and-file for long. DeLauro lost by one vote to Menendez last year for the Caucus spot, while Frost backed away from challenging Pelosi shortly before the Minority Leader election.

"It's certainly fair to say both are active Members with strong political bases within the Caucus," said the Democratic source with ties to the DCCC. "They would certainly consider making a race again. And, neither has any interest in leaving the House anytime in the future."

Frost is viewed as being interested only in running for Minority Whip or Leader, while DeLauro may consider running for the Caucus post again, sources said.

Both the Caucus and Whip jobs could bring lots of competition from less senior Members. Several sources anticipate **Schakowsky** would be a strong candidate for any leadership job, including chairing the DCCC, given her strong fundraising abilities.

"**Schakowsky** is making a play for something," said the Democratic staffer who works for a veteran Member.

Emanuel hasn't hidden his ambitions for higher stature in the Caucus, and has been mentioned as an almost certain DCCC chairman in the future.

"Rahm will be DCCC chair before it's all said and done with," said one of the senior Democratic aides, who added that Emanuel must be careful not to offend his colleagues with his assertiveness.

"He's somewhat of a maverick and rubs people the wrong way," said the staffer. "But he's very smart and he's a great tactician."

Another freshman to watch is Meek, who is considered to be an up-and-comer in the Caucus. Meek, who succeeded his mother in a Florida seat, is viewed as politically savvy and a strong fundraiser.

"He's a pol," one senior staffer said.

In looking at the crop of ambitious Members, sources said Ford cannot be excluded. The legacy lawmaker suggested Gephardt step down as leader after the midterm elections last fall, and then decided to challenge Pelosi just a week before the Minority Leader vote.

While Ford is expected to ultimately run for the Senate, he may take a crack at a Caucus leadership post before then.

"There's no doubt that Harold Ford is a very ambitious Member," said an aide to a well-placed moderate Member. "He's bright, young and energetic. It's clear that his ambitions do not provide for much patience."

And the roster of future possibilities is far from established.

"In five years, someone who isn't thinking about it now may want to do it," said a leadership aide.